A Proposed Synopsis

On

Feminist Rebellion and Agency: Women's Voices in Kate Chopin's Fiction

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Department of English
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1. Title: Feminist Rebellion and Agency: Women's Voices in Kate Chopin's Fiction

2. Introduction:-

The late 19th century was an important period for the emergence of talented female novelists both in England and America. However, they had to face numerous troubles and handicaps because society was not yet ready to allow women "freedom of expression" in voicing their views on social and economic issues of the time. In the case of England, we are aware of the examples of Jane Austen, the Brontes and George Eliot who had to adopt different devices and strategies to make their views and opinions heard with several apologies.

In the event of American fiction, the career of Kate Chpoin, originally Katherine O'Flaherty is one such glaring example of a talented female novelist who initially attracted attention as an American feminist writer of charming short stories full of natural description and solitude of a particular southern region but she was soon silenced, ignored and even boycotted by the conservative American elites and moralizers who even did not allow her the privilege of attending the library in her town. The 1890s and the early 1900s are usually regarded as a dim period for American fiction both in terms of quality and quantity because the tastes of the American public were dictated and shaped by popular magazines and relaxed feminine readers. Against such a background, the rise of Kate Chopin is quite a phenomenon.

To be precise, Chopin was a child of an Irish immigrant father and a St. Louis French mother. From her peculiar biography, it becomes apparent that the family was in the business and lived the life of the French-speaking people in Louisiana. But she lost in quick succession, her father and mother. She was looked after by her grandmother, a remarkable lady who became her sole guardian. It was because of her insistence that she learnt French and gained self-confidence and intellectual vigour. Unlike other children, she was an omniscient reader, introspective and remained aloof from the church and outdoor activities. In other words, she was a child of a retiring disposition and was a kind of enigma. She initially wrote a few revealing

stories in the form of a fable entitled ***Emancipation: A Life Fable*** which dealt with a desire to leave the safe zone for a flight into the unknown, through the fate of an animal leaving the cage for freedom. Her marriage to Oscar Chopin at the age of 25 was an interesting development because her husband saw her potential. But even then, he died within a few years of her marriage, she had however a very important mentor and model in the family doctor Frederick Kolbenheyer who revived her spirit and encouraged her to write fiction and story. Meanwhile, she studied thinkers like Darwin, Huxley and Herbert Spencer and very soon she read French literature of the time and was influenced by both Emile Zola and Guy de Maupassant. But she was more impressed by Maupassant than Zola as in Maupassant, she discovered 'here was life, not fiction'. She liked Maupassant for describing the complexities of human nature in a direct, sincere and simple way. What she regretted in Zola was the external realism whereas in Maupassant she found a kind of inward and psychological realism.

Among American authors, she liked Whitman because he did not ignore the element of love and appreciated his skill and knowledge in the treatment of sex. However, Kate Chopin's career started with magazine stories Viz Voyage, Century and the Atlantic etc. However, for all that, she was criticised and forced into silence because her novel" The Awakening" the conservative audiences and readers who failed to appreciate true and unflattering pictures of human existence and true meaning and purpose. Some critics even regarded it as a new version of Flaubert's Madam Bovary. Certainly, American readers and critics found her true but too frank to accept her novel of adultery, though they initially accepted her early stories about children and natural sceneries. For decades, she was just ignored as a regional writer with limited talent. However, in 1953 and afterwards, there was a reversal of critical opinion and because of critics like Edmund Wilson and a young Norwegian researcher Per Eynert Seyersted, Chopin's novels, poems and prose-writing were discovered and published. Thus, she was soon praised as a writer of exceptional promise and was put in the company of American novelists like Frank Norris, Theodore Dreiser and so on. It appears in retrospect that subsequent critics exaggerated her importance and regarded her as a major writer in the context of the feminist author and her novels as the model

examples of the ' gyno text'. Various claims have been made in her two novels, ***At Fault*** and ***The Awakening*** which have been further compared to the great works of Fontane's Madam Bovary, Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and Flaubert's Effi Briest which deals with the theme of female adultery and violent death. In the case of Kate Chopin, her suicide provides a more realistic amount of a woman's failure to become an artist, in Tolstoy, we have a poetic death whereas in Flaubert, only the physical agony and boredom are highlighted and again in Fontane, the suffering of the soul of the heroine is suggested. In this category, Tolstoy's heroine Anna and Chopin's heroine Adna Pontellier are more moving and poetic. Moreover, from the spate of articles written about Kate Chopin, it appears that she had not been placed properly within the literary tradition of 19th-century American novelists.

3. Literature Review: -

Kate Chopin's most important work lies in her short stories and her two novels. From various reviews, articles and books published about her, it becomes clear that her earlier stories are not as remarkable as her later stories set in the particular palace (Natchitoches) Louisiana. Many of her mature stories are included in two volumes which were published during her lifetime, ***Viz Bayou Folk*** (1894) and ***A Night in Acadie*** (1897). However, all her stories and sketches are found in the authoritative edition of her novels in the 1969 edition introduced by Per Seyersted (***Kate Chopin: A Critical Biography***, 1969 and ***The Complete Works of Kate Chopin***, 1969). The critics in her time were not prepared to tolerate a writer who would ask uncomfortable questions and provoke discussions on a woman's right to live her own life in terms of sexuality and self-assertion. Hence, she was completely forgotten in her own time and was even dropped by friends and membership of a local arts club was not given. As she was ignored by society, she did not publish anything after ***The Awakening*** (1899). Later she completely withdrew herself and finally died of cerebral haemorrhage within a few years (1904). Her revival was possible because of Daniel S. Rankin's biographical book named ***Kate Chopin and Her Creole Stories***, 1932. But even, Rankin did not consider mentioning ***The Awakening*** because it was regarded as a ' morbid ' book. The present attempt would be to take a holistic view of research gaps

and areas which have been ignored and not taken seriously. Hence, her stories of both phases and the study of the first novel "At Fault" along with the much-praised "The Awakening" and the inputs received from the writer's comments need to be focused. This seems to be the main purpose of the present research which would like to place her writings within the historical perspective of 19th-century American literary history and objectively demonstrate her limitations and potentialities. In this context, the leading articles like Kate Chopin's "***The Awakening*** as a part of 19th-century American Literary Tradition", Kennet's essay on ***The Awakening*** as "a forgotten novel" and the reconsideration of her work by Barbara C. Ewell, and Nancy Walker's essay on the social context of her novels and Pittsburgh are worth mentioning. The leader's essay would be taken up for critical examination. From what has been stated in the preceding paragraphs, it becomes clear that the critical attention is mainly focused on ***The Awakening*** and its revival and reconsideration from the feminist point of view. However, her stories like " Desiree's Baby" "At the Cadian Ball", "Wiser than a God "and her latest stories such as "Madame Celestin's Divorce", "The Story of an Hour", " A Respectable Woman" etc. have not received sufficient attention. But they deserve serious consideration as early examples of feminine resistance to patriarchal society in a very convincing manner. Recent critics like Bender and Martha Cutter have drawn Some attention to these neglected areas.

In short, the present research would like to put her writings in the category of American writers of the 19th century such as " Louisa May Alcott, Susan Warner and Emily Dickinson " who also wrote about women, who dared to say " no " to the traditional role by indulging infancy of striving for ' independence and individual freedom through their works. Though by now, Kate Chopin was established as a major feminist writer in the 19th century, much needs to be done to her stories which also aroused controversies but couldn't find proper critical discussion.

4. Research Questions and Hypothesis: -

In the process of research, it will be my effort to project the works of Kate Chopin from various perspectives. Despite self-imposed limitations in the choice of subject, Chopin remains a fascinating topic for research and my modest attempt will be to restore the perspectives and

put her achievements between the two extremes of a southern regional writer to a pioneer realist female novelist. Her claim as a writer needs to be stated and established. The editor of Kate Chopin rightly observed in the "Literary History of the United States, that Chopin is highly praised as an outstanding local colour artist." But no mention is made of ***The Awakening*** and her status as a realist, to quote him, yet she was the first woman writer in America to accept sex with profound repercussions as a legitimate subject for serious fiction. To my mind, she was a pioneer of psychological fiction in America and she was at once a true realist and visionary who could peep into women's sufferings and struggles within the realm of patriarchy. Although much work has been done by many leading critics but still many of her stories and other works have been overlooked. I will attempt to put them together to have specific objectives and a proper appreciation of her fiction and writing as a whole.

5. Objectives: -

The present research aims to achieve the following:

- **Analyze the feminist themes** such as rebellion, agency, and empowerment in Kate Chopin's fiction, with a focus on how women's voices are represented and empowered within the patriarchal contexts of the late 19th and early 20th centuries.
- **Explore how her characters navigate** societal norms and expectations, and how their actions reflect forms of feminist rebellion and agency
- **Discover factors such as race, class, and region**, and how these intersect with gender to shape women's experiences and expressions of rebellion and agency.
- **Explore various reader responses to Chopin's works**, both contemporary and modern, to understand how interpretations of feminist rebellion and agency have evolved and how different audiences engage with these themes.
- **Conduct comparative analyses between Chopin's works and those of other feminist writers** or literary movements, examining similarities, differences, and unique contributions to feminist discourse.
- **Investigate how Chopin's narratives contribute to the construction of empowerment narratives for women**, exploring how characters' actions and choices challenge and reshape societal structures and norms

- **Analyze how her portrayals of female rebellion and agency** have been interpreted, contested, and contextualized over time
- **Examine how her narratives continue to resonate** with contemporary audiences and inform discussions on gender equality and women's rights.

6. Research Methodology:

This proposed research analyses the recurring themes in Kate Chopin's Short Stories and novels from various perspectives such as Feminist, psychoanalytical, sexuality and liberation, challenging patriarchal norms and so on. Literature reflects social norms like a mirror of life as it derives incidents from situations raised from the interaction of man and their social world. The analysis of this research is based on geographical differences, intersectionality gender, race and class. It also suggests that the acceptance of the behaviour of a man and his natural surroundings leads to achieving a deeper understanding of life and their self - realization. Human beings have reached behind the progress, but their sole identity lies only in being with each other.

This research work will further follow a theoretical framework of chronological approach in discussing Chopin's works as her work focuses on motherhood and independence of late 19th century American civilization, their regional and Southern identity feminist rebellion and various agencies. This research is based on the analysis of the primary and secondary sources. The primary sources include the close reading of Kate Chopin's selected short stories and novels linking them to her main concerns whereas the secondary sources include books, journals, articles, dissertations, thesis, websites and so on. This approach will be analytical and comparative. The writer's views and opinions as scattered in her remarks and illustrated in her literary works will be coordinated to arrive at a workable hypothesis and conclusion.

7. Research Coverage: -

In my studies, several questions and queries would be addressed and a few tentative observations would be explored.

After an in-depth study of the selected Kate Chopin's short stories and novels the various recurring themes and viewpoints will be explored from various

perspectives. The selected works of Kate Chopin include some novels and short stories for my research:

Novels

- At Fault
- The Awakening

Short Stories

- Wiser than a God
- A Point of Leisure
- A Respectable woman
- The Story of an Hour
- Regret
- Athenaise
- A Pair of silk stockings
- The Storm

8. <u>Contribution to the Field:</u>

Kate Chopin's revival and glory is one of the most pleasant surprises of the critical discovery of an ignored author of 19th-century American literature. Chopin is famous for writing stories that explore women and feminist themes such as critiques of necessary and traditional gender roles. Her stories show women wanting their freedom in a society which has specific roles assigned to them. Chopin is a realist and a regionalist. Her stories focus on everyday events and middle and lower characters while also being set in locations she knew personally without any bias. She laid the groundwork for later feminist writers from the beginning to now. Thus, the present study will use Chopin's works to reveal her worth as a novelist whose vision of America is shaped by her personal experiences which are even more realistic and fascinating to the attention of the people.

9. Structure of the Research work:-

My proposed research work will tentatively be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background of the Research
1.2 Objectives of the Research
1.3 The Size of the Sample
1.4 Significance of the Research
1.5 Likely Influence on Kate Chopin

Chapter 2: Literature Review & Feminist Theory

2.1 Kate Chopin and Her Works
2.2 Previous Studies on Kate Chopin's Literature
2.3 Feminist Theory
2.4 Concepts of Rebellion and Agency in Feminist Theory

Chapter 3: Sources of Social, Literary and Philosophical Influences

3.1 Sources of Social and Literary Influence
3.2 Sources of Philosophical Influences

Chapter 4: Analysis of Kate Chopin's Works

4.1 Feminist Rebellion and Agency in "The Awakening"
4.2 Feminist Rebellion and Agency in "The Fault"
4.3 Feminist Rebellion and Agency in the Selected Stories

Chapter 5: Conclusion

5.1 Summary of Findings
5.2 Implications for Future Research

10. References:

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